

Welcome to the Fitch Natural History Reservation

A place set aside

The Fitch Reservation got its start in 1947 when renowned mammalogist E. Raymond Hall, director of the KU Museum of Natural History, asked Chancellor Deane Malott to arrange for 590 acres of the University's Robinson Farm to be set aside as a reservation where native plants and animals could be protected and studied under natural conditions.

Henry S. Fitch, already acquainted with Hall, had the right background for the job of resident naturalist. He had earned the Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, under the guidance of Joseph Grinnell, a premier naturalist of the time. After Berkeley, he worked as the first field assistant at the newly founded Hastings Reservation, a natural history reserve in California, and then was hired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for work in California, and, more briefly, in Louisiana. He married Virginia Preston in 1946.

Writing to KU Field Station scientists decades later, Alice Fitch Echelle said the importance of her mother's role was well-understood: "I remember my parents telling me that when E.R. Hall conducted the initial interview for the newly created position at KU, he emphasized that it was interviewing the two of them, because it was obvious that the spouse could make or break the success of the primary applicant for this position."

In 1948, Henry Fitch was hired as the first superintendent and as a resident naturalist of the new KU Natural History Reservation and as a faculty member in the KU Department of Zoology. That July, he began a marathon of natural history studies that extended into the 21st century. His research set a new standard for long-term ecological studies. Few subjects escaped his attention, and his studies covered a diversity of organisms including mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, snails, spiders and trees. Fitch likely did not imagine he would be marking and recapturing animals on the same area after nearly six decades, and he could not easily have foreseen the changes he witnessed.

With patience, persistence and dedication, Fitch documented many changes and trends, some surprising. For example, there now are fewer species of reptiles inhabiting the Reservation than in the early years of his studies. He attributed this to ecological succession resulting in a decrease in the availability of contrasting habitat types. His local studies extended to the KU Field Station lands to the north, where land-management techniques such as burning, mowing and grazing are regularly implemented on an experimental basis. These areas provide a particularly useful contrast to the Reservation, where such management techniques are not practiced. Fitch's painstakingly thorough studies provided the long-term data so highly valued and sought-after by scientists—and set the stage for research that continues at KU and around the world.

You've come to a special place. This Reservation, the oldest part of the KU Field Station, dates back to 1947. It covers 590 acres and is the site of long-term ecological studies known worldwide. The Fitch Natural History Reservation is named in honor of Dr. Henry S. Fitch and his family. For six decades, beginning in 1948, Fitch was the naturalist at this site, studying here and raising a family on the Reservation with his wife, Virginia R. Fitch. Henry Fitch conducted pioneering research in ecology and taught thousands of visitors of all ages about nature. Virginia Fitch was a partner in the Reservation's mission of long-term ecological research and was known for her graciousness in making all feel welcome. This kiosk is dedicated to Henry and Virginia, in memory of their quest for knowledge and their love of nature.

A house, a family, a teacher

Henry Fitch was given a choice of living quarters when he came to KU. The old house of Kansas's first governor, Charles Robinson, was available, but his wife Sara, about two miles down the road from the Reservation headquarters, was available. The alternative was to wait for the University to build a residence on the area. Fitch chose the latter; "which seemed a much better arrangement since I was going to be in charge of the Reservation," he said in a 2002 interview. The house, buildings and yard became the hub of activity: a staging area for research, a launching point for nature walks and a place for family. In March 1950, Fitch and his family moved into the newly constructed cinderblock home.



Henry Fitch with a Copperhead snake, on the lane between the county road and the Reservation residence. This photo, taken in the 1970s, shows relatively open grassland. The image is one of dozens that show Fitch handling snakes over the decades.



(Left) The Fitch family on the Reservation, 1959 (from left, John, Virginia, Henry, Chester and Alice). Right: Henry Fitch on the lane west of the house, mid-1950s. (Below) Images from 1948 and 2004, looking east from the county road into the entrance of the Reservation, illustrate immense changes in the landscape over six decades. All historical photos of the Reservation and Fitch family members courtesy of the Fitch family.



(Left) The south side of house, with the screen porch on the east under construction. (Center) Circa 1950, looking north, with screened porch of new house on the left. The structure on the right was the first KU building on the site and was to be used as a laboratory. It was a converted two-room building moved in 1948 from the area where Allen Fieldhouse would be constructed beginning in 1952. It remained on the Reservation until 2010. (Right) Family basketball game in 1992 on the "court" south of the lab. The player on the left establishing rebound position is Henry Fitch, age 83.



(Above left) Fitch and a student examining a rodent, 1951. (Above center) Fitch's ecology class studying small mammals, 1951. Note the open grassland on the Reservation. (Above right) Thousands were treated to a nature walk as part of the Reservation experience. This generally occurred after a brief orientation and display of animals near the house. (Below left) The gathering spot was the turn-around of the driveway, where Fitch would show live animals and specimens. Fitch gave natural history demonstrations for people of all ages. (Below right) Discussing snake anatomy with students in 2000.

"... every question he was asked about a plant, animal or anything else was treated as if we'd made a great discovery. I've tried to keep that same enthusiasm and wonder in my dealings with children in our programs."

—R.H. Gossard, former director of public education, KU Museum of Natural History, in a 1998 interview

1947

The job interview
Henry Fitch had much to offer the right experience, a deep passion for his work, thorough and meticulous research methods, and an enthusiastic spouse.

"I was invited by E. Raymond Hall to apply for the position. I came to KU and gave a seminar on my work at SERR [California] and got the job."
—Henry Fitch as related to Alice Fitch Echelle in 1998



Fitch with outdoors in March 1947 at San Jacinto. Environmental change (SERR) while working for the newly created U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Late 1940s-early 1950s

The open landscape
There were major shifts from open fields to woodlands during Fitch's tenure here. He documented changes in plants and animals, and provided a rich legacy for the future.

"When we first came here, from the house we could see cars crawling on the country road!"
—Fitch as recalled to KU Field Station scientists



Fitch children at the newly constructed cinderblock house (new house) coming into view from the north in 1948. If you come to the lane today you cannot see the house, which is now surrounded by trees.

1960s-1970s

Forest succession
The effect of fire management (during mowing, grazing) became obvious as the Reservation gradually filled in with shrub-covered areas and large trees.

(Above right) Photo taken in 1967, looking west on the lane between the bridge crossing and the entrance to the Reservation. (Center) Photo taken in 1970, looking northwest of Virginia Fitch and east of the residence. Size of the black car on the left side of the photo. (Far right) Photo taken in 1973, looking west of Henry Fitch on the lane. Size of the house is on the right side of the photo.



1980s-1990s

University policy
Last 1984, KU required all faculty on retina at age 70. In 1985, Fitch reached mandatory retirement age and was forced to "retire." But he continued to work for nearly another 30 years, staying on the Reservation and making major research and teaching contributions.

"The agreement was that I could live in the house as long as my presence here is to the benefit of the University and I will try to make it so..."
—Fitch in a 1992 interview



"Even before we were married, we used to spend most of our dates together snake-hunting or lizard-hunting. I can't think of anything that would have been more fun."
—Virginia Fitch, Wichita Eagle-Beehive interview, 1987

(Far left) Fitch with snake rop at age 70. (Far right) Fitch holding Henry and Sara as a snake-hunting retrospective on the porch inside the house, 1993.